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ABSTRACT

Oakland Unified School District may embody the failures of public education, which makes it worth examining for causes of failure and for potential reforms. This district has the second highest parental dissatisfaction in the nation, with two-thirds of graduates not able to meet minimum eligibility requirements of the state's colleges. It is also the district known for promoting Ebonics, a street patois raised to a language for classroom instruction. This report traces the causes of its problems to top-heavy bureaucracy, weak and reactionary leadership, union rigidity, shaky fiscal policies, low standards, and an inappropriate curriculum. There were gross inequities in curriculum and resources from school to school. Barriers raised by bureaucracy and union rules made it difficult to hire qualified teachers, while emergency credentials rose from 481 to 825 from March to November in 1999. Also noted was the large number of inexperienced teachers assigned to schools with largely African-American populations. The report concurs with Mayor Brown's Commission on Education. Schools should have a curriculum proven to improve reading ability, administrators should have authority to hire or dismiss staff without regard to seniority, and districts should be free to extend school days, provide Saturday schools, or operate year-round. Also recommended is the development of charter schools and other independent or deregulated schools. (Contains 69 notes.) (RKJ)

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Failing Grade:
Crisis and Reform in the Oakland Unified School District

By K. Gwynne Coburn and Pamela A. Riley

July, 2000

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Executive Summary

Despite numerous efforts at reform, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) is failing in its sole mission to provide quality education to Oakland's children. Student achievement data, dropout rates, college eligibility, remediation rates, and parental dissatisfaction statistics all testify to the failure of a district now poised for innovative change.

Failing Grade details the problems faced by Oakland Unified and offers recommendations to increase achievement. The findings include the following:

- Across all grade levels, OUSD students scored significantly lower than students in both the state and Alameda County on the 1999 California Standard Achievement Test—Version 9 (SAT-9). This year's test results are scheduled to be released by the California Department of Education on July 17, 2000. For an update, visit PRI's website at www.pacificresearch.org after the release date.
- In the initial year of Academic Performance Index rankings, 42 of the district's 57 elementary schools receiving an API ranking scored a five or below, and no public Oakland high school reached the targeted performance goal of 800.
- Over four years, 21.8 percent of Oakland high school students will drop out of school, compared with 11.7 percent of students throughout California.
- Two-thirds of Oakland graduates did not meet the necessary requirements for eligibility into the California State or University of California systems.
- Only 11 percent of OUSD high school seniors taking the SAT scored above 1000.
- More than one-third of OUSD students are designated as limited-English-proficient, yet only one percent of those students are reclassified English proficient.
- In comparison with other cities throughout the nation, Oakland boasts the second-highest percentage of parents dissatisfied with the public education system.

Recommendations for Reform

Oakland can begin to correct its failures with the adoption of proven and challenging curriculum, rigorous content standards, more flexibility for school sites to address unique needs, the ability to contract out for services such as cafeteria and school maintenance, and the development and support of education alternatives such as charter and magnet schools. Both the Mayor's Commission on Education and the state's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team have advocated many of these recommendations.

While these reforms will help a struggling system, Oakland can achieve more fundamental change by empowering parents with more choice and opportunity in their children's education. By implementing a choice-based system for the district's low-income children, Oakland could not only turn around a failing system, but become a model for reform across the state and nation.

Introduction

With dismal achievement scores, classroom horror stories, administrative chaos, and the Ebonics controversy, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) has become the poster child for the failings of public education in California and across the nation. These failures have been charted in countless articles and were of such gravity that California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) was called in to audit the floundering district in 1999. This report will survey Oakland's performance, but its purpose goes beyond the charting of obvious failure.

Policymakers, parents, and citizens agree on the need for fundamental reform. Those reforms require a solid base of information, which this report will provide. Oakland Mayor Jerry Brown, a former governor of California, has established a Commission on Education and the FCMAT report has made recommendations. The Oakland district itself, and California's educational establishment, have their own concepts of reform, centered on increased spending. This report will consider which efforts have the potential not only to improve the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) but also to make it the model for a new education system in California.

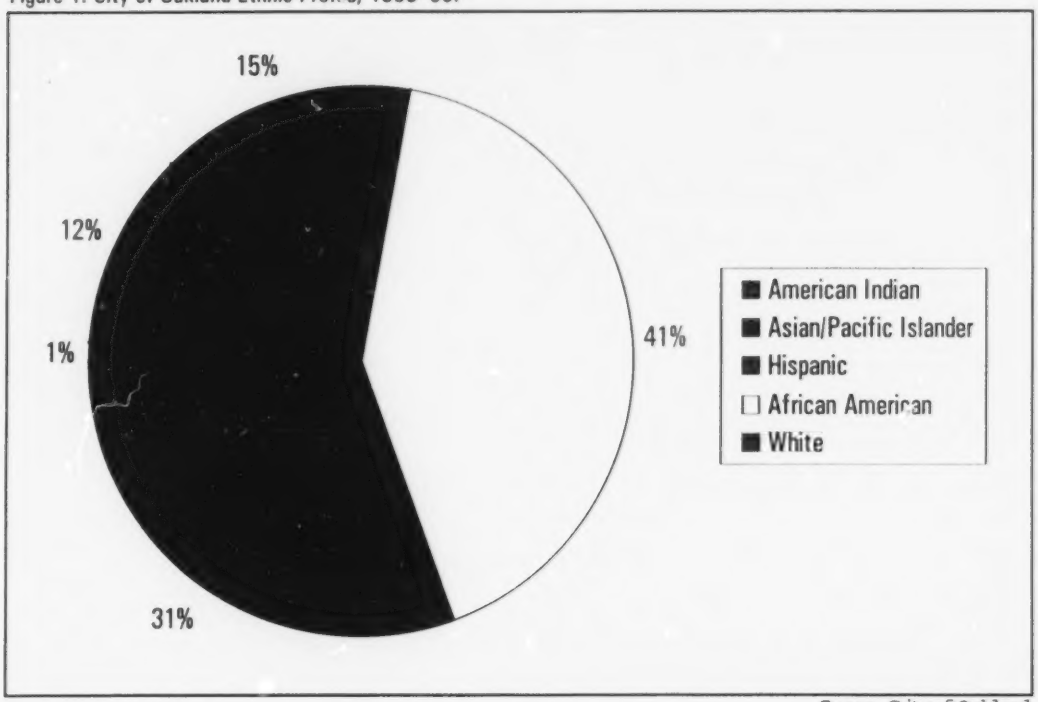
Demographics

The eighth largest city in California, Oakland is a diverse community representing more than 125 language groups and comprising a 77-percent minority population. (See Figure 1.) The OUSD is one of the largest districts in the state, comprised of 91 schools serving more than 50,000 students.[1] A full 94 percent of these students are from an ethnic minority group, surpassing the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), with 89 percent.[2] (See Figure 2.) The diversity, however, does not excuse the district's poor performance. Demographically, Oakland's school district is similar to those in San Francisco, San Bernardino, and Fresno. Yet none of those districts has experienced failure on the magnitude of Oakland's.

Likewise, in Oakland 34 percent of students are designated limited-English-proficient (LEP).[3] Although that designation does not always denote poor performance, it does pose a challenge, as does socio-economic status.

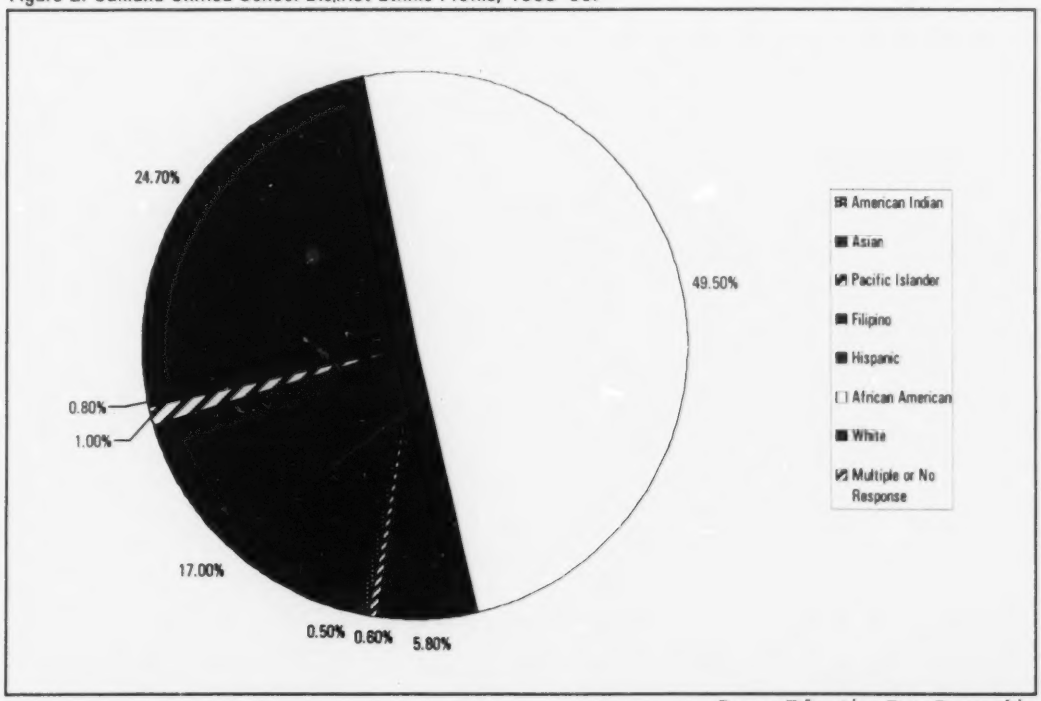
Based on the indicator commonly used to denote low-income status, eligibility for federal free- or reduced-price meals, two-thirds of the OUSD's children do not have the resources of children in other districts of Alameda County. Given proper teaching methods and support, such students can improve, as proved by programs like that of Principal Nancy Ichinaga's Bennet-Kew elementary school in Inglewood or at the Crown School in Brooklyn, New York.[4] The need for such reform extends beyond Oakland, to districts throughout California.

Figure 1: City of Oakland Ethnic Profile, 1998–99.



Source: City of Oakland

Figure 2: Oakland Unified School District Ethnic Profile, 1998–99.



Source: Education Data Partnership

Academic Achievement

On national achievement tests, California lags behind the rest of the nation, and the nation has not performed up to world-class standards. On the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, America's 12th-grade students performed behind all other industrialized nations.[5] California's ranking at the back of the national pack is even more dismal, and within California, OUSD's achievement scores are among the worst. Oakland has consistently performed at the lowest achievement level within the state across a broad variety of indicators.

STAR Scores

Since 1998, all California students have been required to take the Standard Achievement Test—Version 9 (SAT-9) under the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) program. Results of this test allow parents and policymakers to measure student performance district by district and school by school. These scores, measured according to national percentile ranking, allow for comparisons at the national level. And while testing should not be the sole measure of student performance, it gives important insight into the practices and policies that are either helping or holding back students.

Across all grade levels, in both reading and mathematics, the OUSD's students have scored significantly lower than averages for the state and Alameda County. (See Figures 3 and 4.) Even when one controls for the high number of LEP students, Oakland's scores rank much lower than the countrywide and statewide averages. Moreover, the longer LEP students remain in the district, the worse their scores become. (See Figure 5.)

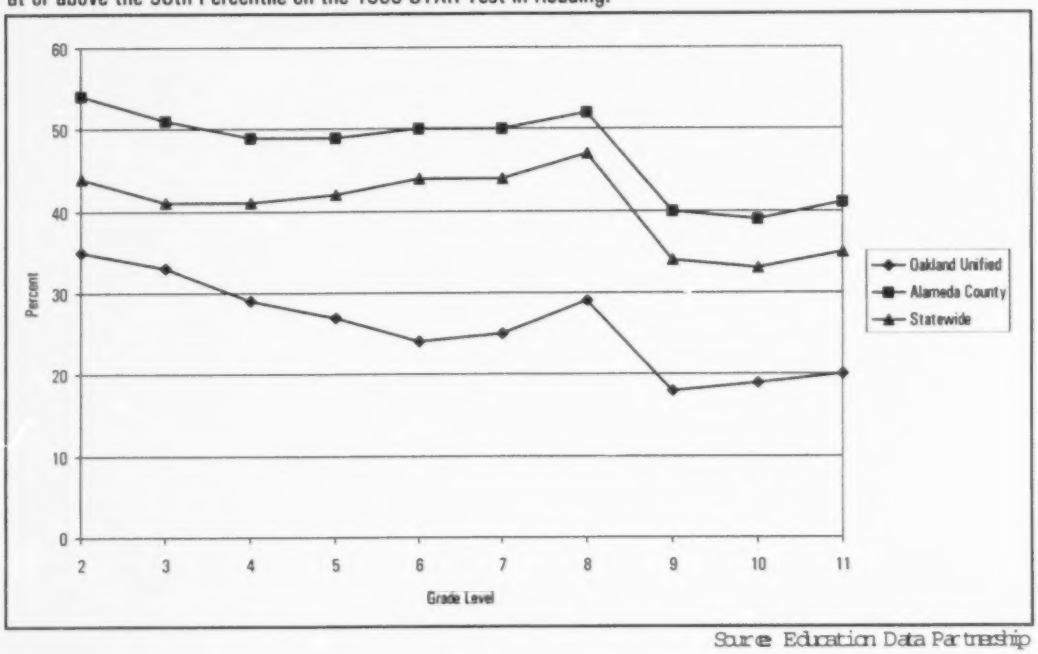
Academic Performance Index (API)

In 1999, as part of the state's new academic accountability program, all public schools were ranked according to their SAT-9 performance. Although it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the initial year of such rankings, California's Academic Performance Index (API) can provide a partial portrait of Oakland Unified.

Each school received an API score from 200 to 1,000. If a school receives the score of 1,000, it is considered a "very high performing school."[6] The target ranking for all schools in California is 800, a baseline number also used to calculate the school's statewide ranking from one to 10. Schools receiving the ranking of one scored in the first decile, or bottom 10 percent, and are considered among the lowest performing schools in the state. Conversely, schools scoring a 10 are in the top 10 percent and considered "high performing."[7]

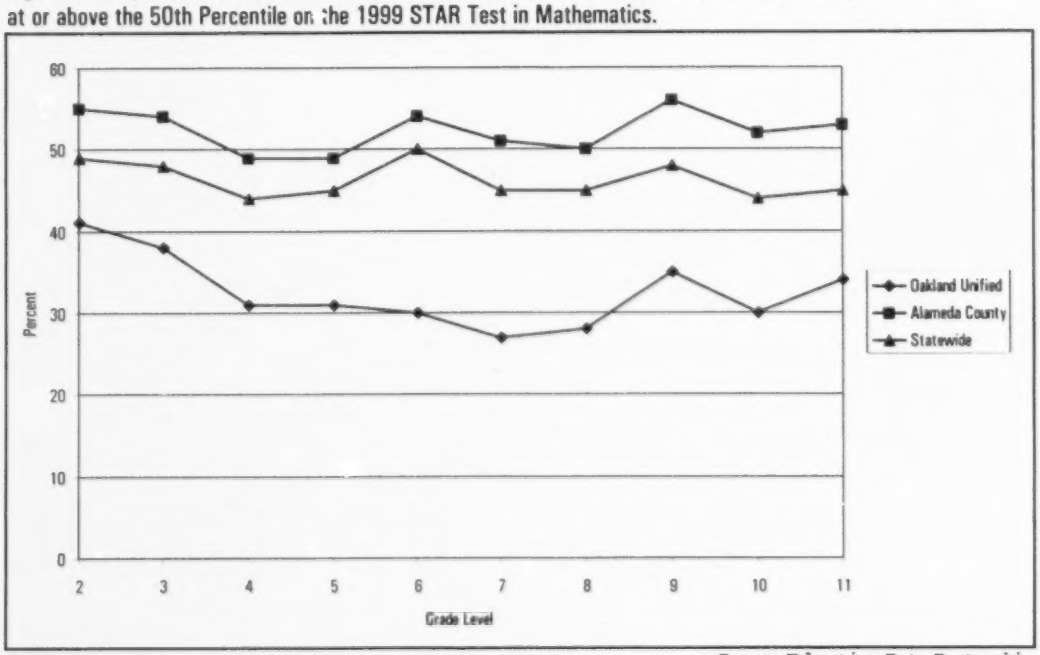
Given Oakland's performance on the SAT-9 exam, it is no surprise that district schools received low rankings on the API. Only 16 out of the 79 Oakland schools receiving an API ranking scored above the fifth decile.[8] (See Figure 6.) Five high schools scored five or below and no Oakland high school reached the targeted performance score of 800. A full 42 of 57 of the district's elementary schools were scored at

Figure 3: Comparisons for Oakland Unified, Alameda County, and California by Percent Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the 1999 STAR Test in Reading.



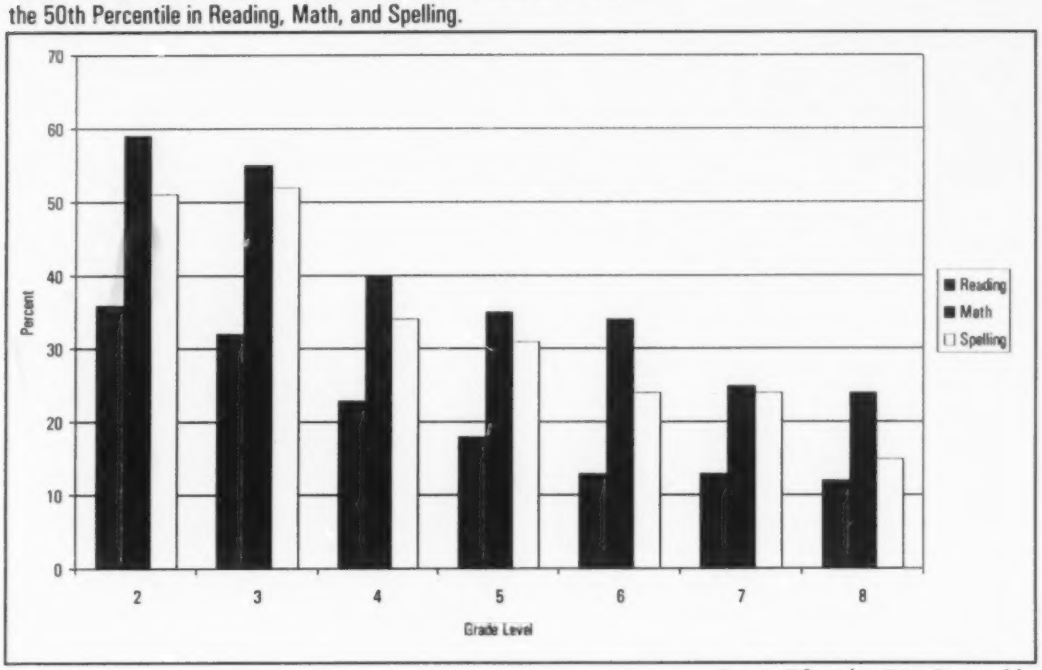
Source: Education Data Partnership

Figure 4: Comparisons for Oakland Unified, Alameda County, and California by Percent Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the 1999 STAR Test in Mathematics.



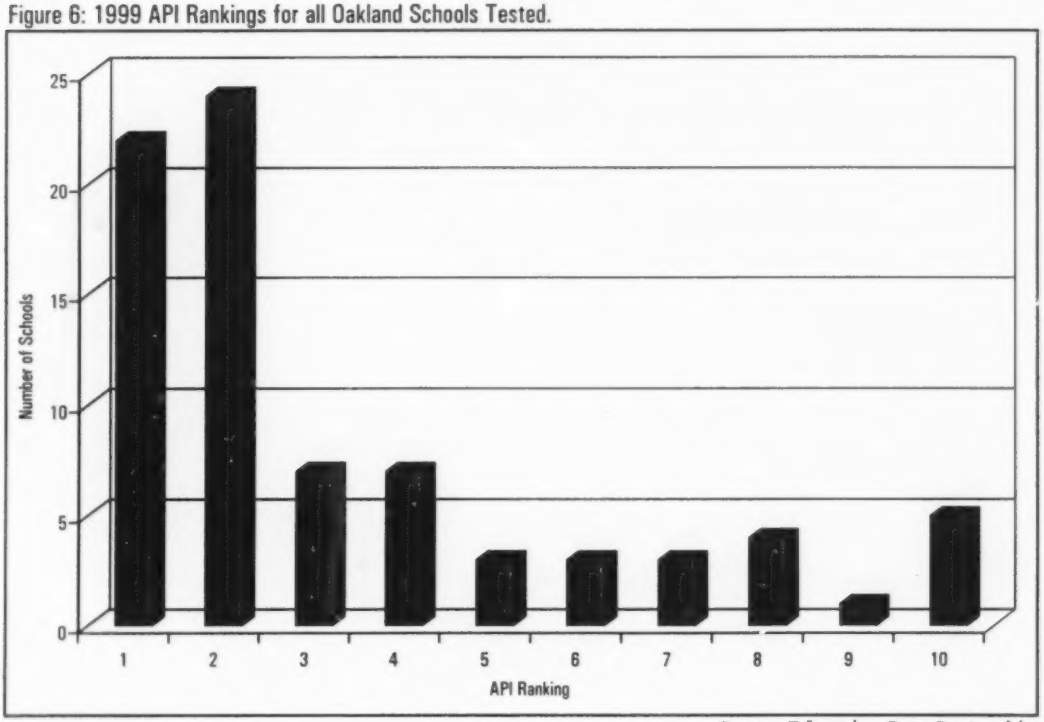
Source: Education Data Partnership

Figure 5: 1999 Limited-English-Proficient Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile in Reading, Math, and Spelling.



Source: Education Data Partnership

Figure 6: 1999 API Rankings for all Oakland Schools Tested.



Source: Education Data Partnership

five or below. None surpassed the fifth decile, placing these schools in the bottom half of schools in the state.

Dropout Rate

Statewide, 2.9 percent of students drop out of high school each year, with a loss of 11.7 percent of students over a four-year period.[9] In Oakland, however, 5.6 percent of the district's students drop out in a single year, with a loss of 21.8 percent of students over the course of four years. One-fifth of those entering any of Oakland's public high schools will not leave as graduates. This high dropout rate cuts across all ethnic lines. (See Figure 7.)

White students drop out at a rate of 20 percent, African Americans at 23 percent, and Filipino students, the highest, at 30 percent. And given the test scores, one must question whether those who actually obtain a diploma are prepared for the rigors of college or a career.

SAT Scores

The poor performance of OUSD's high school students is echoed in their performance on the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT), which is the best predictor of ability to succeed in higher education.[10] As opposed to the SAT-9, which is taken by all students in grades 2–11, the SAT is an elective test taken by high school seniors. In 1998, 46 percent of Oakland high school seniors chose to take the SAT exam, higher than the statewide average of 36 percent.[11] However, the performance of Oakland students does not compare favorably to statewide averages.

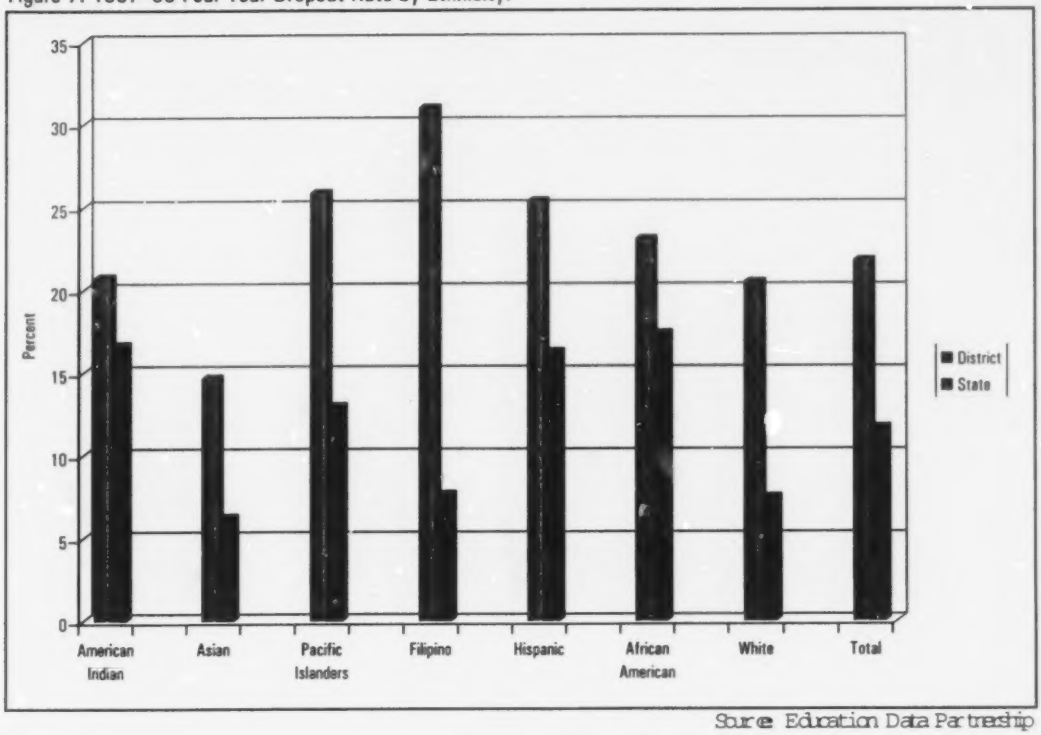
The average Oakland math score was 443 and the average verbal score 416 for a combined 859 out of 1600. These scores compare unfavorably with the statewide averages of 516 in math and 491 verbal, for a combined SAT score of 1007. (See Figure 8.) Statewide, 19 percent of those tested scored above 1000, while in Oakland, only 11 percent reached that level.

CSU and UC Eligibility

Another marker of student achievement is the number of students eligible for admission to either the California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) systems. California has placed strict guidelines on the entrance requirements for these universities. Students applying for either must take three years of math including algebra, geometry, and algebra 2 (or the equivalent thereof), two years of science, four years of English, two years of social studies, two years of foreign language, and one year of visual or performing arts.[12]

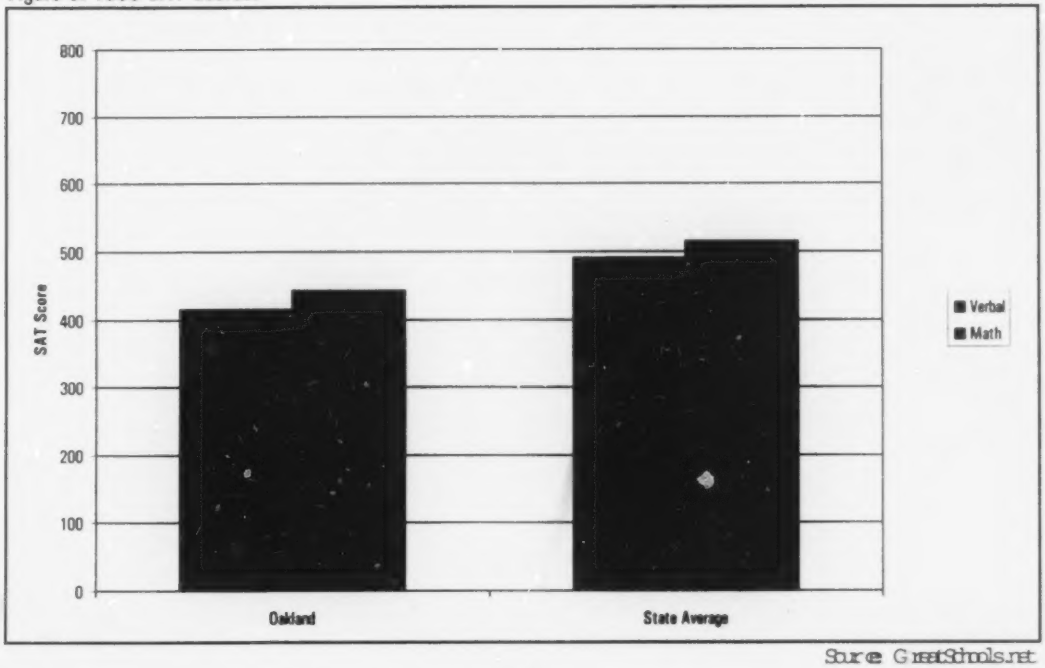
A full two-thirds of Oakland's high school graduates did not meet these college preparatory curriculum requirements and are, therefore, ineligible for CSU or UC.[13] Those who gain admission also show insufficient preparation.

Figure 7: 1997–98 Four-Year Dropout Rate by Ethnicity.



Source: Education Data Partnership

Figure 8: 1998 SAT Scores.



Source: GreatSchools.net

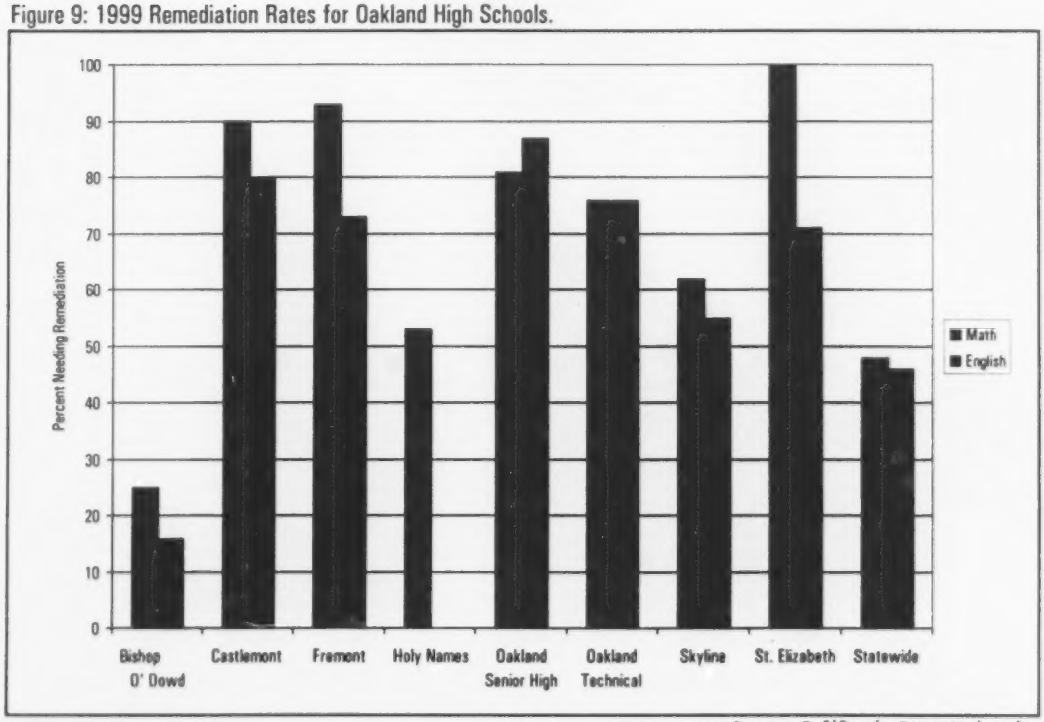
Oakland Senior High is one of the district's top schools in sending students to the CSU system. A full 87 percent of those graduates, however, need remediation in English and 81 percent in mathematics. (See Figure 9.) CSU's figures indicate that just under half of the total freshman class need remedial instruction in math and English.

Limited-English-Proficient (LEP)

One of the biggest challenges to the California public school system is the number of students designated limited-English-proficient (LEP). Over the past eight years, the number of children in Oakland designated as LEP has risen steadily.[14] (See Figure 10.) While the number of children designated LEP has increased, the number of children reclassified as English proficient has not. In fact, Oakland Unified can only boast a one-percent reclassification rate for its nearly 20,000 LEP children.[15] (See Figure 11.) The district also experienced difficulties teaching English to those whose native language is English.

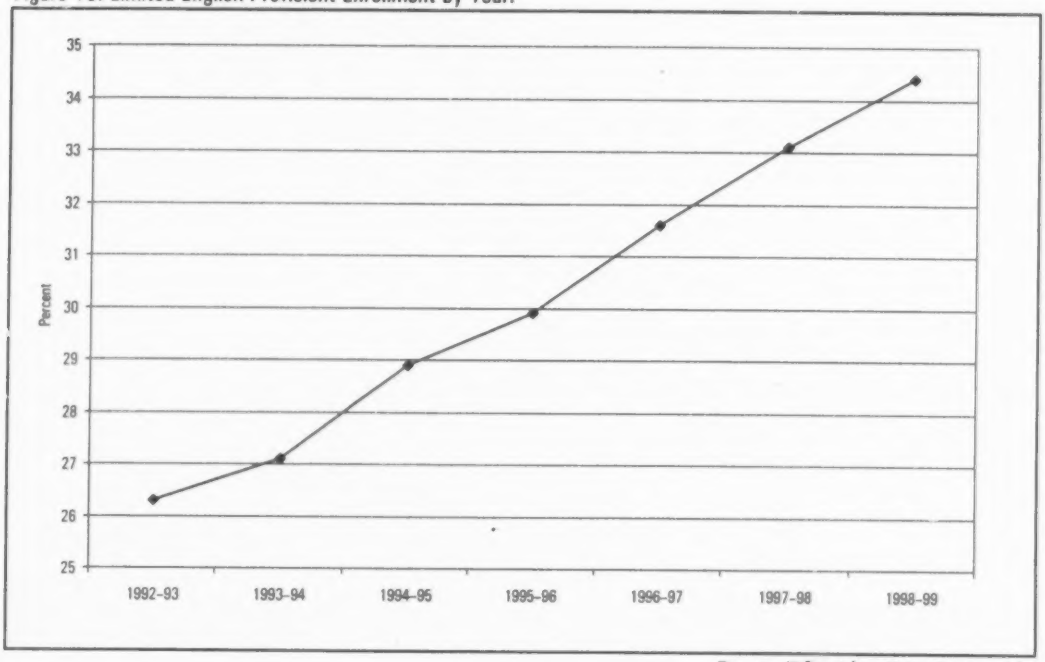
Oakland found itself in the national spotlight in 1996 when it declared that Ebonics, a street *patois*, was a separate language worthy of classroom instruction. Critics of the practice included a number of prominent African Americans, and the affair made Oakland the object of national ridicule.

Figure 9: 1999 Remediation Rates for Oakland High Schools.



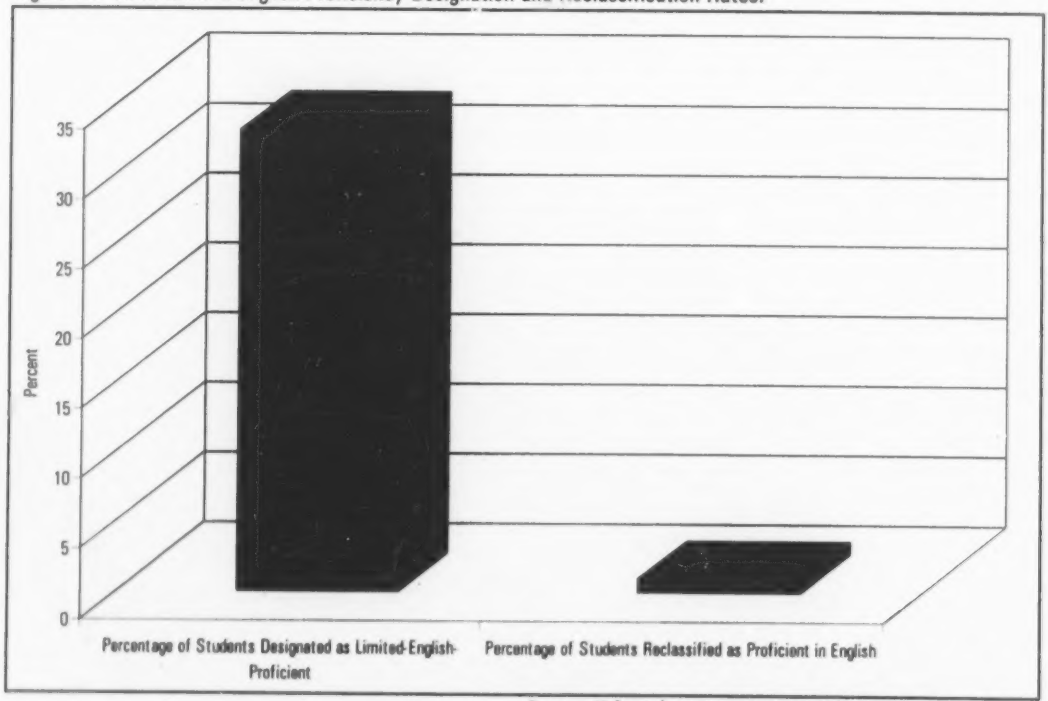
Source: California State University

Figure 10: Limited-English-Proficient Enrollment by Year.



Source: Education Data Partnership

Figure 11: 1998 Limited-English-Proficiency Designation and Reclassification Rates.



Source: Education Data Partnership and GreatSchools.net

Social Promotion

California public schools have long cultivated the practice of moving students on to the next grade, even if they do not meet the promotion requirements. Though done on the grounds that students held back would not feel good about themselves, "social promotion" is an educational fraud that sets up students for deeper failure and disillusionment.

Just last summer, the district was faced with another scandalous round of excuse-making that frustrated parents and education reformers alike. The district had set tough standards for its students in regard to promotion to the next grade level. It required more than 14,000 students to repeat courses in summer school or face the consequence of being held back from promotion. However, more than half of these children failed to comply with the summer school requirements.

Rather than carrying out their threat, the district promoted the students anyway, reinforcing the destructive message that actions have no consequences. The inaction also angered and confused parents and Oakland officials.

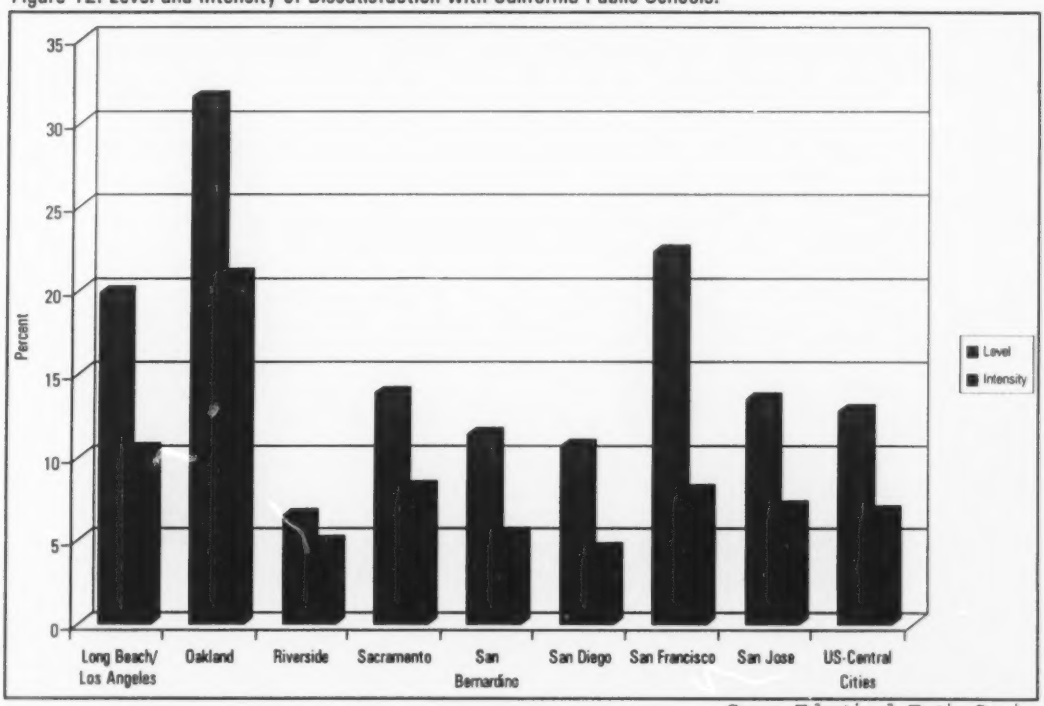
"The district kept talking about making students accountable for their grades, but the adults aren't being accountable by running the program smoothly," said Sylvester Hodges, co-chairman of the Task Force on the Education of African American Students.[16] Mayor Brown was also stunned by the action of the board saying, "There is a painful lack of clarity coming out of the school district."[17] Of that condition parents are well aware.

Parental Dissatisfaction

Oakland has the second-highest level of parental dissatisfaction in the nation, according to a 1999 report by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).[18] No other district in the state, including the much-maligned Los Angeles Unified, comes close to both the level and intensity of dissatisfaction in Oakland. (See Figure 12.) In general, studies have shown that parents' main concern in their cities is crime, yet in Oakland, parents are just as worried about schools.[19] Parents are so profoundly unhappy that, given the opportunity, they would move in order to send their children to better schools.

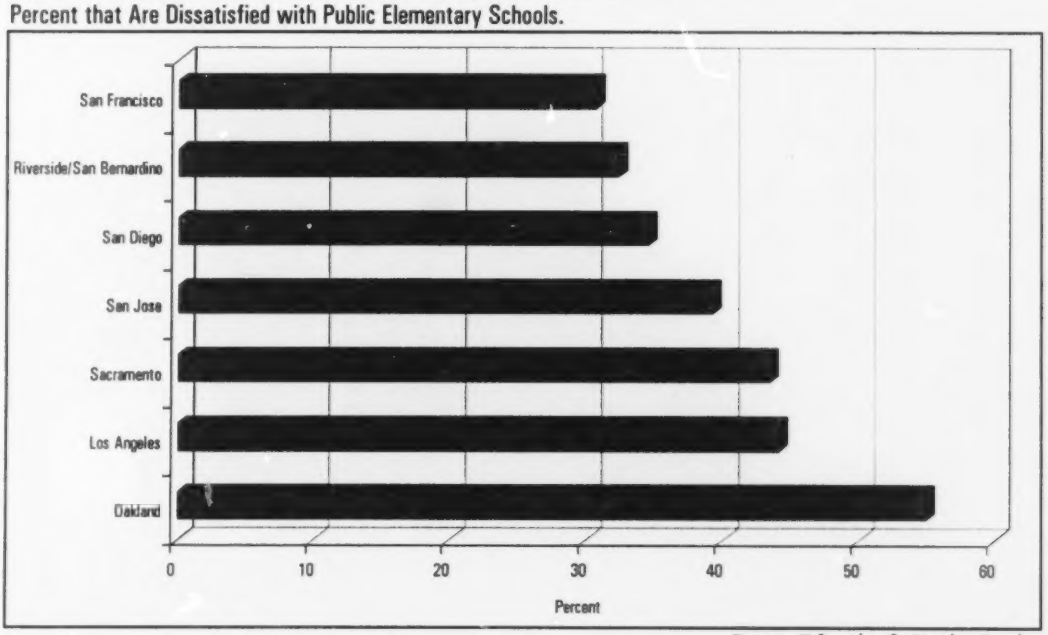
The ETS report further analyzes this dissatisfaction, revealing that over half of the parents sending their children to private schools are dissatisfied with Oakland public schools. (See Figure 13.) Of all the cities surveyed throughout the nation, Oakland had the greatest percentage of parents, a full 10 percent more than Los Angeles, who moved their children to private schools because of dissatisfaction with the public schools. Parents in the inner city and suburbs shared the same concerns. Like policymakers, parents have sought answers as to how their district could have deteriorated into such a sorry state.

Figure 12: Level and Intensity of Dissatisfaction with California Public Schools.



Source: Educational Testing Service

Figure 13: Among Households that Enroll their Children in Private Schools, Percent that Are Dissatisfied with Public Elementary Schools.



Source: Educational Testing Service

Tracing the Causes

In their extensive audit of Oakland Unified, California's Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) found that the district significantly lacked high quality management and leadership. Management is mired in bureaucracy and its dysfunctional practices have fostered miscommunication and stagnation within the district as a whole. The FCMAT report describes Oakland Unified as having a "flawed operational philosophy" which has "further exacerbated the ineffective functioning of the district."[20] The report details at great length the lack of leadership and common vision for the district, concluding that a district without these essential elements is unable to function at a high level.

The auditors gave the district a failing grade in fiscal management as well as academic performance. Oakland has managed to translate above-average spending into below-average results.

District Finances

By law, education is the single largest expenditure in California, currently more than $40 billion for K–12 alone. Most of the money going to California schools is tied to categorical funds that are rarely evaluated for student performance. (See Figure 14.)

In 1999–2000, California's public schools are receiving from all federal and state sources an average of $7,535 per pupil.[21] The Oakland Unified School District spends $7,933, more than the state average, yet the increased spending has not translated into results. The Sausalito Unified School District spends $16,655 per student, more than twice Oakland's expenditure, but its SAT-9 scores were not much better than Oakland's.[22] (See Figure 15.)

The high spending in both districts underscores the judgment of leading education economist Eric Hanushek, University of Rochester, that "there is little systematic relationship between school resources and academic performance."[23] Hanushek believes that "How money is spent is much more important than how much is spent."[24] Even the policy evaluation arm of the California legislature, the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO), has stated that it is not the "input" of money into the system that matters most, but the "output" of performance results.[25] Ongoing statewide investigations prove that Oakland has not spent its resources wisely.

Figure 14: Categorical Spending Programs, 1999–2000.

State Programs	1999–2000 ($Millions)
Special Education	2,258.598
Class Size Reduction—Grades K–3	1,534.254
Child Development, Preschool	854.750
Desegregation (Court Ordered $504.993, Voluntary $138.015)	643.008
Adult Education & CalWorks	542.246
Transportation, Home to School	455.893
EIA (Economic Impact Aid)	394.105
SIP (School Improvement Program)	385.921
ROC/P (Regional Occupational Centers/Programs)	320.383
Instructional Materials—Standards-based	250.000
Staff Development Day Buyout	225.146
Summer School and Remedial Programs	309.777
Class Size Reduction 9th Grade	160.664
School Library Materials	158.500
Instructional Materials—Grades K–8 & 9–12	158.062
Digital High School	151.100
Deferred Maintenance	143.700
Per-Pupil Block Grant	134.000
Mentor Teacher/Peer Assistance and Review	125.000
High Achieving/Improving Schools	96.150
Child Nutrition	75.471
Reading Program	75.000
Per-Pupil Testing and Test Development	74.669
Year-Round School Incentives	73.825
School Safety Block Grant	71.078
Categorical Programs Block Grant	67.831
Immediate Interventions/Underperforming Schools	63.704
English Learner Student Assistance/Teacher Training	55.000
Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment	51.344
Beginning Teacher Minimum Salary	50.000
Teacher Performance Program (II/USP schools)	50.000
English Language Acquisition	50.000
GATE (Gifted and Talented Education)	49.601
Healthy Start	39.000
Community Day Schools	30.423
Tobacco Use Prevention Program	27.044
Miller-Unruh Reading	26.328
Classroom Library Materials	25.000

State Programs (cont.)	1999–2000 ($Millions)
Educational Technology	22.364
Charter School Categorical Programs	20.000
School Development Plans Resource Consortia	19.615
Dropout Prevention Program	19.202
High-Risk Youth and Public Safety	18.000
Partnership Academies	16.276
School/Law Enforcement Partnerships	11.608
Tenth Grade Counseling	9.749
Apprentice Program	9.508
Foster Youth Programs	7.677
Academic Improvement & Achievement	5.000
Demonstration Programs and Intensive Instruction	5.530
Administrator Training	4.633
Specialized Secondary School Programs	4.506
County Office of Education and Fiscal Oversight	4.080
Agriculture Vocational Education	3.798
Bus Replacement	3.995
Indian Education Programs/Centers	3.981
Gang Risk Intervention	3.000
Plus Other Programs under 3 Million	

Major Federal Programs	1999–2000 ($Millions)
Child Nutrition	1,290.106
Title I [Formerly Chapter I] (ESEA, $905.561, Migrant Education, $108.448)	1,014.009
Child Development	620.409
Special Education	453.198
Class-Size Reduction	129.142
Vocational Education	119.613
Drug-Free Schools	45.494
Goals 2000	47.428
Educational Technology	45.204
Adult Education	42.284
Emergency Immigrant Education	39.174
Title VI [formerly Chapters]	38.472
Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) Program (II/USP School S)	32.446
Title II ESEA (Professional Development)	31.873

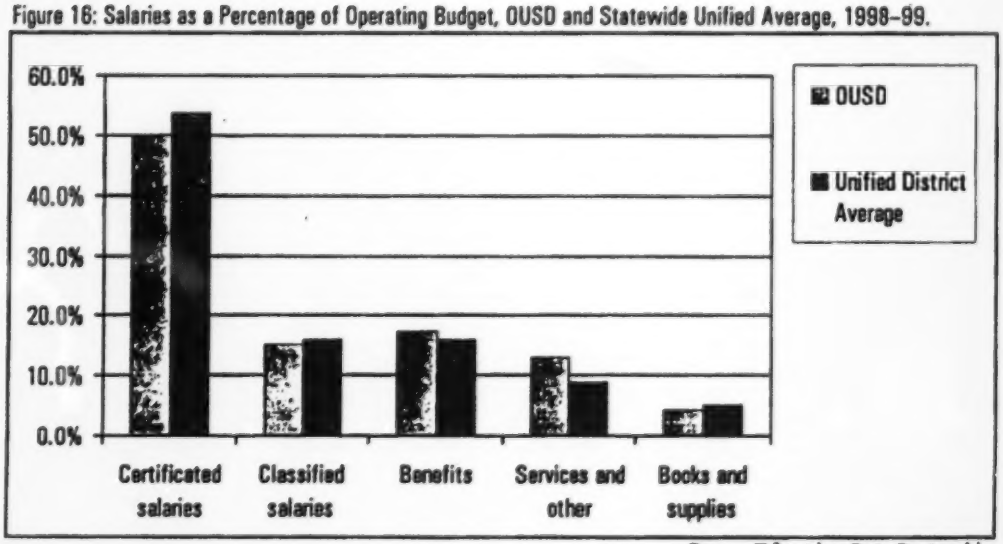
Source: EdSource

Figure 15: Percentage of Students Scoring at or above the 50th Percentile on the 1999 Statewide SAT-9 Test.

District		Grade 2	Grade 6	Grade 9	Grade 11
Oakland	Reading	35%	24%	18%	20%
	Math	41%	30%	35%	34%
Sausalito	Reading	30%	38%	–	–
	Math	36%	33%	–	–
Fresno	Reading	26%	30%	21%	29%
	Math	35%	36%	37%	44%
San Jose	Reading	44%	45%	44%	44%
	Math	50%	48%	61%	57%
San Francisco	Reading	55%	45%	43%	41%
	Math	60%	56%	64%	60%
Sacramento	Reading	51%	41%	28%	33%
	Math	45%	50%	42%	45%
Kern H.S.	Reading	–	–	28%	27%
	Math	–	–	41%	34%
Los Angeles	Reading	24%	24%	18%	25%
	Math	36%	42%	31%	38%
San Bernardino	Reading	28%	25%	19%	25%
	Math	36%	35%	32%	38%
San Diego	Reading	50%	45%	38%	38%
	Math	56%	50%	49%	49%
Santa Ana	Reading	21%	15%	10%	15%
	Math	37%	28%	29%	35%

Source: 1999 STAR Test Results

Figure 16: Salaries as a Percentage of Operating Budget, OUSD and Statewide Unified Average, 1998–99.



Source: Education Data Partnership

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Fiscal Mismanagement

Oakland has recently been found guilty of over-billing the state for union contract negotiations and is now required to reimburse the state $2.4 million.[26] Furthermore, the district is being audited due to extremely high Average Daily Attendance (ADA) numbers. Oakland claimed a 94-percent attendance rate, which is comparable to suburban districts which have lower truancy and suspension rates than Oakland.[27] Schools are allocated funding based on their ADA rates and if Oakland is found guilty of falsifying these records, it will owe the state almost $10 million.

The FCMAT report details at length Oakland's lack of fiscal management. In its audit, the FCMAT team set 91 standards for fiscal management. Of those 91 standards, the district had not implemented a single one.[28] The district lacks any mechanism to perform an internal audit, which might have prevented some of these most recent fiscal mismanagement allegations. With regard to the management of student funds, the audit found that "there were many internal control problems observed in the accounting for student funds."[29]

Given this level of mismanagement, it is understandable that Oakland citizens are skeptical about entrusting the Oakland school board with more money, despite the passage of a $303 million bond in the most recent election. However, this bond is targeted for facilities management and development, rather than operational costs of the district.

The FCMAT report has shown gross mismanagement of finances at the district level. It should be no surprise that this mismanagement would also impact teacher salaries.

Teacher Salaries

Salaries and benefits constitute the highest percentage of expenditures for school districts. On average, unified school districts statewide spend 86 percent of their budget on salaries and benefits. Oakland's expenditures for salaries and benefits of all staff are slightly lower, at 83 percent. Salaries of teachers and other certificated staff, such as principals and administrators, total 50 percent of the district's budget, lower than the statewide average of 53 percent. (See Figure 16.) Since Oakland is not matching the salaries of its teachers to those in comparable districts, some observers wonder where the money goes. Oakland spends four percent more on the nebulous "services and other operating expenses" category than comparable unified school districts in the state.[30]

Oakland exceeds the statewide average in providing benefits to its staff, bringing the total compensation package available to teachers much closer to the statewide average. The beginning salary of teachers in Oakland in 1998–99 was $29,260 and the highest salary was $55,009, with an average salary of $42,600. While Oakland's average salary is lower than the state average, beginning teachers are compensated above the norm, and senior teachers earn high salaries as well. Most important, teacher salaries do not take classroom performance into account, rewarding good and bad teachers equally.

Teacher Quality and Shortage

Oakland teachers and their union say that unless they are paid more, qualified teachers will not come to Oakland. Yet many of the barriers to recruiting teachers are related to bureaucracy and union rules.

One teacher certified to teach science applied in Oakland in 1997 and again in 1998. Nearly two years later, she was extended an offer to teach a bilingual education class.[31] Potential teachers with both skills and desire find district bureaucracy an obstacle. Additional monies for these teachers will not solve the problem of an ineffective mechanism for using the available resources. The FCMAT report supports the stories of these frustrated potential teachers.

Upon examination of OUSD's Human Resources Department, the auditors found outdated staff manuals and employees who had received no training in job responsibilities or who had no idea of departmental goals. One of the handwritten 1999–2000 organizational goals was to "Do something to improve the quality of substitutes."[32] The number of teachers in Oakland with emergency credentials rose from 481 on March 3, 1999, to 825 in November of 1999, almost a 100-percent increase in the span of eight months.[33]

Once teachers have been granted opportunities, it is important they are evaluated to ensure they are performing. The FCMAT report reveals that Oakland is failing in this duty, as well. The auditors found that "The evaluation of all personnel has not been a district priority."[34] It is clear that the FCMAT auditors find this a serious flaw of the district.

At the time of the printing of this briefing paper, the Oakland Unified School Board and Oakland teachers had just agreed to a new contract. The starting salary for new teachers will jump from $29,260 to $37,918. Veteran teachers earning the highest salary will find their earnings jumping from $55,009 to $68,144 a year.

Many claim that this pay increase is the essential factor in solving Oakland's education woes. Yet the fact remains that without sound leadership and a strong proven curriculum, the education malaise will continue. Salary increases will not necessarily improve the quality of education, unless they are implemented with a system of pay for performance or differential scales. Sheila Quintana, president of the local teachers' union, thinks differently. "This tells people they can stop sending their children to private schools," she commented.[1]

However, until Oakland improves the quality of education in its public schools, those with the resources to send their children to private schools will continue to do so. Unfortunately, the children of parents without such resources will remain trapped in failing schools.

1 Meredith May, "Oakland Teachers get new contract," *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 13, 2000.

In order to improve, they make the strong recommendation that "Evaluations must be seen as a priority by the administration, starting at the top ... The district must demonstrate its commitment to the implementation of a comprehensive evaluation process."[35]

The report further delineates this mandate to include the specific evaluation of teachers. They suggest that the district develop a "remediation plan process to effect change in the marginal teacher. This plan must designate available resource personnel, training opportunities, scheduled reviews, time lines for progress reports, and concluding evaluations with predetermined options."[36]

Collective Bargaining and District Reform

FCMAT found that "The number of bargaining units in the district far exceeds the number of bargaining units in most districts."[37] This may be a factor in Oakland's failings. A study by Harvard economist Caroline Minter Hoxby concludes that "teachers' unions may be a primary means whereby a lack of competition among public schools translates into more generous school inputs and worse student performance."[38] Since OUSD is not forced to compete for its students, lack of competition can indeed be a factor in poor student performance.

No Standards, No Vision

Since 1975, nine superintendents have served the Oakland district, and since 1985, no superintendent has served more than four years and seven months.[39] It is difficult to imagine how a clear and definitive vision for the district can be achieved with such a high turnover rate.

Because no clear vision has existed, no direction has been given to teachers and administrators about student achievement goals or curriculum choices. In fact, many of the board policies regarding curriculum are more than 10 years old.[40] California adopted rigorous content standards only three years ago. It is unlikely that the new standards are reflected in Oakland's outdated policies or are aligned with Oakland's classroom curriculum. The Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team audit states that the district is lacking "a comprehensive curriculum management plan that provides the policies and procedures needed to support district priorities and increase the likelihood of successful implementation."[41]

Further investigation by the FCMAT auditors found gross inequalities in curriculum and resources from school to school throughout the district, signaling misappropriation at the district level. The mismanagement of resources includes teachers. The FCMAT report found that "the faulty practices governing the assignment of faculty have resulted in a large number of inexperienced teachers assigned to schools with largely African-American populations."[42]

From the analysis from the FCMAT report, it seems that the lack of curriculum guidance is negatively impacting the amount of learning in Oakland classrooms. The auditors noted that Oakland teachers had not implemented state standards and had not modified or

Another Door Closes in Oakland

by Gwynne Coburn

Recently, in a depressing move, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) board rejected Mayor Jerry Brown's proposal for the establishment of a charter school, the Oakland Military Academy (OMA). The rejection of Brown's innovative idea slams shut the door of opportunity on Oakland students who desperately need better alternatives in a district that, as this briefing paper details, has produced some of the worst dropout and graduation rates in the state.

The 1998–99 dropout rate in OUSD was 24.1 percent. Twice that of the state's. Even worse, though, were Oakland's college preparation statistics for minority students, especially the men.

African-American students accounted for 745 out of 1,618 graduates from Oakland high schools, or 46 percent.[1] However, only 29 male African-American students, or 1.7 percent of total graduates, met the coursework eligibility requirements for entrance into a CSU or UC school.[2] The figures are even worse for Latino males.

Of the 258 Latino graduates, only 8 male Latino students were eligible for CSU or UC, or .5 percent of total graduates.[3] No matter the excuse, these figures demonstrate undeniably that Oakland high schools are failing to educate their students. It is precisely this dismal record that makes the rejection of Mayor Brown's Military Academy so disturbing. The OMA would have been a charter school offering parents and students a choice of a more structured learning environment.

Charter schools are deregulated public schools run by parents, teachers, and community groups. OMA's charter states that its mission is to create leaders and critical thinkers in an environment which would also foster honor, pride, respect, confidence, and appreciation for others. It would be a highly structured and rigorous setting, complete with challenges created to foster team-building and goal-setting skills.

This environment would be in direct contrast to Oakland Unified, a district described in an audit by the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT) audit as "institutionalizing low expectations for student achievement ... and perpetuating an attitude of self-preservation and cynicism."

The OMA would be more akin to Principal Norma Baker's Hudnall Elementary School in Inglewood. Ms. Baker believes that "If you set high expectations for children, they generally rise to the occasion," a principle her students proved last year by ranking high on the Academic Performance Index, despite the fact that nearly half of her students have limited proficiency in English.[4]

OMA students would also benefit from a rigorous academic curriculum, based on California's new academic content standards and complete with benchmark testing. This would also be an improvement over Oakland Unified, where FCMAT auditors found outdated curriculum manuals and little attention to state standards.

By testing children regularly, OMA teachers would know whether the children are learning the material, or simply skating by, which might lead students eventually to drop out of school. Teachers could intervene at the first point of failure and stop the process.

With so much to commend it, why did the Oakland board vote down the OMA? In addition to the usual bias against charter schools, the board gave credence to bizarre conspiracy theories.

Sheila Quintana, the local teacher union president, charged that the OMA would be a version of the Tuskeegee Institute, where medical experiments were done on African-American military personnel half a century ago: "We shouldn't be experimenting on our black, brown and Asian and every other race's children," she said.[5]

Though lampooned nationally, this hysteria nevertheless contains a grain of truth. It is wrong to experiment on children, but that is precisely what the Oakland schools are doing with their weak curricula, low standards, and low expectations, leaving them intellectually handicapped for life.

Unlike currently failing schools, the OMA would have been held truly accountable for the academic success of its students. If it failed at its mission of increasing graduation rates through high standards and discipline, it would have been shut down. But the board prefers that the school not even have the chance to start.

The rejection of common sense and innovation for hysteria and reaction ensures that Oakland's experiment in failure will continue to produce dropouts at record levels.

adjusted instructional plans according to student needs and success. The auditors found no evidence of teachers evaluating themselves based on student performance and then adjusting their teaching methods accordingly. They also found that "most teachers failed to use a variety of instructional strategies to address diverse student needs."[43] Educators often complain that one type of teaching methodology should not be forced upon them, and that they must have the freedom to employ whatever methodology is available in order to reach every student. But in Oakland it appears that most teachers do not even use this common excuse for not using effective teaching strategies.

Unfortunately, the methods and curriculum in use are not working, if there is a curriculum being used at all. FCMAT auditors visited Oakland classrooms, and in 98 classes they found no instruction evident. FCMAT auditors recommended that Oakland, "Develop and implement a comprehensive curriculum management system with aligned and articulated curriculum guides that establish challenging student learning and a vision of excellence for the district."[44]

The Quest for True Reform

As Mayor Brown began his efforts to reform Oakland's public schools, he appointed a Commission on Education comprised of civic and community leaders. Last year, the Commission issued its report, which took a critical look at the schools and made sound recommendations for the district's improvement. In their report, the Commissioners acknowledge the need for serious reform, an acknowledgment buttressed by the FCMAT report. They even made innovative suggestions as to what must be done to bring about change in the district. The remainder of this briefing describes the Commission's recommendations and expands on them with strategies to ensure real education reform in Oakland.

Adopt Challenging and Proven Curriculum and Skills Strategies

It is promising that the Commission has recognized the importance of a challenging and proven curriculum, such as Open Court and Success for All, to improve reading ability. Another instructional method for student improvement is Direct Instruction. Over recent decades, many instructional methodologies have been studied to track their impact on student performance. The methodology showing the strongest gains is Direct Instruction, a rigorous method that scripts classroom lessons for teachers and requires the use of education drills.

While these methods are often criticized as didactic and stifling, they have been proven to work, and not just in measurable student performance. According to a study conducted by the American Institutes of Research (AIR), "Direct Instruction also appears to improve students' affective behavior and social skills: self-esteem/concept, attitudes toward self and school, attribution of success or failure to self, and sense of responsibility."[45]

Further, this type of instruction has been shown to be as effective for children in all IQ ranges. In a district which has had no real leadership, the adoption of Direct Instruction methodologies could give teachers a valuable tool to reach out to all their students, to the students' benefit on achievement scores and for their feelings of self-worth.

Direct Instruction also requires teachers to continually evaluate students for performance. A placement test is given for each student's initial evaluation and which can be used as the benchmark for their achievement. If a student begins to fail, it will be evidenced by the teacher, who can intervene to ensure the child receives the attention needed to stop the pattern of failure. The employment of Direct Instruction in Oakland's schools would be a step toward the fulfillment of the Commission's suggestion that "each school site must develop curricula and standards consistent with district and state guidelines, with the expectation of student success."[46] It would also help some of the specific problems plaguing the district. The AIR study found Direct Instruction also appears to improve chances for later success, with higher graduation rates and acceptance to college.[47]

A Sense of Priorities

The FCMAT report called for schools to take on more responsibility for a broad range of social programs. Since it is imperative that schools concentrate on student achievement and teacher performance, they should not be burdened with providing services more appropriately provided within the family. It becomes difficult for schools to focus on their main mission of educating children when they have to provide health services and childcare. Schools which are failing to educate are not prime candidates to take on additional duties better handled by families themselves.

Provide Strong Leadership

In the March 2000 election, Oakland voters approved Measure D, giving Mayor Brown the authority to appoint three members to the Oakland Unified School Board, increasing its members to 10. However, prior to the election, the school board appointed Dennis Chaconas as the new superintendent, over Brown's recommendation of interim superintendent George Musgrove. This turn of events has set the district up for power squabbles, which could be paralytic for reform efforts. The essential players must put aside their differences in an effort to implement real reform in the district.

High Standards, No Excuses

The notion that students from ethnic minorities and low-income families cannot achieve at high levels is refuted by all evidence and is not an acceptable excuse for those charged with the education of children. Quackery such as Ebonics is simply an institutionalized confession of failure. Oakland Unified would be wise to take its cue from Roundstone Elementary in Kentucky.

Though predominantly made up of low-income students, achievement scores have soared. The school makes no excuses for poor performance and operates on the premise that "When poor students are held to high standards, they meet them."[48] So will Oakland's students, when they face the same high expectations.

Give Flexibility to Oakland's Schools

The Mayor's Commission notes that school "site administrators and principals must be free to choose the best teachers, counselors, and other staff … They must be allowed to select employees without favoritism and regardless of seniority."[49]

School sites must have the flexibility to assess all employees and to dismiss those with unsatisfactory performance. Another option that gives more flexibility to schools while reaping the added benefit of improved and efficient school management would be to contract out services such as cafeteria, landscaping, and school maintenance. By contracting for services, the school would have more control over the performance of the services, and would finally have the opportunity to fire an underperforming service provider.

Competitive bidding for services would also drive costs down, thus freeing up more money to the schools. While abhorrent to the unions, this idea was supported by the FCMAT auditors who suggested, "The district may want to consider outsourcing other maintenance and operations services" based on the performance of "considerable savings for the district" resulting from the OUSD's reliance on private contractors for energy management.[50]

Implement a "System of Schools That Work"

The Commission has realized and reported that the highly bureaucratic school system must be replaced by a streamlined and efficient "system of schools that work," in which schools will have more autonomy in order to meet the needs of their diverse student populations.[51] The Commission has recognized that the top-heavy bureaucracy within the district was hindering schools' performance and suggested giving the schools more autonomy to design programs that will work for the unique characteristics of each school. The Commission also recommends that schools should be granted the leeway to extend school days, provide Saturday school, or change to a year-round system.

Observe State Law

The ability to function in the English language is critical to the success of students, both in higher education and the job market. With such a high number of limited-English-proficient students, Oakland must make a special effort to follow state law on language instruction. The voter-approved Proposition 227, which mandated the elimination of bilingual education programs throughout the state and has been upheld by the courts, is already producing results.[52] The measure will, if fully implemented, produce comparable success in Oakland.

Avoid the Spending Excuse

If Oakland's problems could be solved by increased spending, they would have long since disappeared. A district that has spent above the state average but produced below-average results has no grounds to make claims for increased spending. Policymakers and the public have no reason to give such demands any credence.

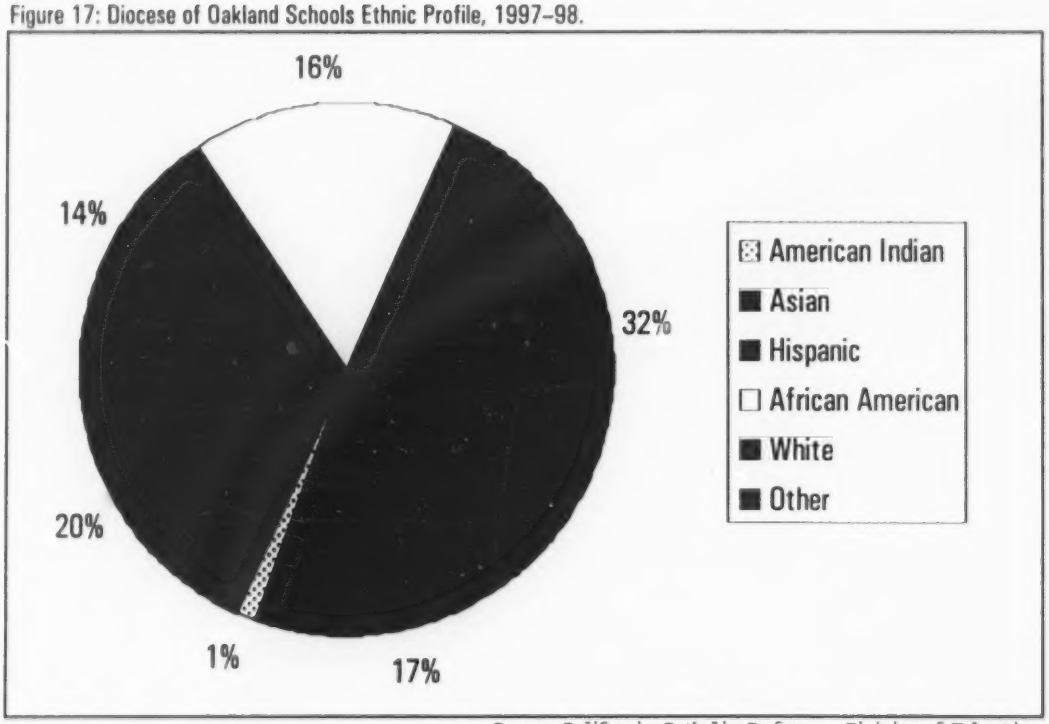
The *California Index of Leading Education Indicators 2000* shows that the state is already spending more money per pupil on education than acknowledged by the California Department of Education (CDE). A January 2000 survey by the Public Policy Institute of California found that while Californians are clearly concerned over the educational failings of the state, they are not willing to entrust Sacramento with more education money.[53] Indeed, they want to ensure that their education tax dollars are being spent on programs and resources which will actually help students, before they will funnel more money into additional programs.

Increase Teacher Quality

Teacher quality is instrumental to improved pupil achievement, and recent studies have shown that subject knowledge is the most important factor in teacher quality. Through their studies, economist Dan Goldhaber and RAND Education Director Dominic Brewer have linked teacher subject content knowledge and student achievement. They have concluded that "in mathematics and science, it is the teacher subject specific knowledge that is the important factor in determining tenth grade achievement."[54] They also found that students whose teachers hold bachelor's or master's degrees in mathematics outperform students whose teachers lack these credentials.[55]

While a credential can denote teacher competency, it is not imperative that all teachers possess such credentials. Oakland would do well to consider expanding access for specialists in science and math. This strategy is currently employed in Pennsylvania where the secretary of education has noted that "Students at expensive private schools have always had the benefit of subject area specialists who are passionately devoted to their subject without traditional state certification..."[56] Easing credential requirements will provide similar benefits for Oakland's students.

Figure 17: Diocese of Oakland Schools Ethnic Profile, 1997–98.



Source: California Catholic Conference Division of Education

Develop and Approve Charter Schools

The most promising of the Commission's recommendations is to develop a large number of charter schools, independent and deregulated schools within the government system. Thirteen charters have been approved, Mayor Brown has proposed two more (a school for performing arts and a military academy), and the California Department of Education has awarded planning grants to six charter development groups. (See Figure 17.)

Guilbert Hentschke, dean of the University of Southern California's School of Education, has noted that charter schools are, in part, a response to the growing recognition that education reform must embrace "market forces and incentives in providing public services such as schooling."[57] The charter school movement has attracted a wide variety of developers from the private sector. These groups range from community organizations such Oakland's Organization of Community Organizations (OCO) to education management organizations (EMOs), such as University Public Schools and the School Futures Research Foundation, both of which operate charter schools in Oakland. Nationwide, EMOs account for 10 percent of all charter schools.[58]

Mayor Brown has invited one of the most successful EMOs, The Edison Project, to Oakland. Edison is backed by $161 million in private investment, including a $25 million philanthropic grant from the Fisher Family Foundation. Despite the capital and record of improving schools across the nation that Edison can bring to Oakland's charter movement, the district's unions have opposed the effort, claiming that the for-profit company will pay teachers less.[59]

The union's view is short-sighted. While it is true that teachers in Edison schools work longer school days and more days in the school year, most are compensated accordingly. In addition, teachers have many more opportunities for advancement, such as master teacher and department head status. As a result, most Edison schools have waiting lists of teachers.

Expand Parental Choice in Education

Charter schools are part of a national grassroots movement to provide parental choice in education. One report has estimated that one-half million California students "participate in public choice options, about nine percent of the state's enrollment. Another ten percent will continue to attend private schools."[60] The Oakland Mayor's Commission on Education acknowledged this growing trend only in passing, noting that "A successful system of schools should give parents a range of choices, because no type of school is best for every student." While the Commission's support of charter schools and public school choice is laudable, it does not go far enough. Without competition in the form of publicly-funded scholarships, it is impossible to guarantee parents, especially low-income and minority parents, the freedom to shed the shackles of a failing school.

Many parents in Oakland have voted with their feet and sent their children to a private or parochial school. More than 25 percent of Oakland's children, 15 percent higher than the state average, attends private schools.[61] The city's more than 50 private and parochial schools make up one-third of the total schools, public and private, in the city.

The Oakland Catholic Archdiocese instructs 21,000 of the students enrolled in private schools. Almost 70 percent minority, these students reflect the demographics of the city and the public school district. (See Figure 17.) Despite the high concentration of low-income and minority students, Oakland's Catholic schools score much higher on almost every academic indicator than do OUSD schools. A full 99 percent of the Diocese's students graduate from high school and enter a two- or four-year college.[62]

A privately-funded scholarship program, the Oakland Children's Educational Opportunity (CEO), has stepped to the fore to give the parents of low-income children the same options that wealthy and middle class parents have. The Oakland CEO has awarded more than 300 scholarships paying half the tuition at a private or parochial school, up to $1,500. With 2,142 families on the CEO waiting list, demand for choice outstrips supply.

Oakland would do well to follow the example of Milwaukee Unified, a district which for years shared Oakland's problems and is now overcoming them. The key to their reform is the city's publicly-funded scholarship plan.

Low-income parents were given a choice, and began to choose to send their children to schools outside of MUSD's control. In order to continue to keep children enrolled in its public schools, the district had to take decisive action. Milwaukee closed habitually poorly performing schools, and opened new, high quality public schools in low-income areas, including charter schools. The district had to evaluate its personnel practices, ultimately deciding that schools needed to have more flexibility in the hiring and firing of teachers. In fact, more teachers were terminated during one year than during the last 20 years. Fiscal decision-making was brought back to the school level. This shift enabled the schools to address the specific problems of their unique situations. New programs for performing arts were implemented as well.

Evidence shows that vouchers improve the performance of both voucher-receiving students and students who remain in public schools. Harvard economist Caroline Minter Hoxby, found that "A $1,000 voucher would improve student performance across the board: both public and private school students would increase their educational attainment (about 2 years), test scores (about 10 percent) and wages (about 14 percent)."[63] Milwaukee student achievement scores exemplified this research.

Professor Paul Peterson, director of Harvard University's program on Education Policy and Governance, who has studied the impact of scholarships on Milwaukee students, has found that the math and reading scores of students increased significantly.[64] However, the improvement was not only for those receiving scholarships; the scores of public school students increased as well.

The United States Supreme Court has let stand a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision validating the program, putting to rest the tired argument that voucher programs are unconstitutional. A recent report by Wisconsin's state auditor refutes the arguments that the public-scholarship programs are racially divisive and harmful to the public schools. The only remaining arguments against school choice are political, not an acceptable recourse for a district in the position of Oakland, nor for taxpayers who pay the bills.

From Crisis, Opportunity

As noted at the outset, Oakland embodies the failures of public education. Like other districts, Oakland enjoys guaranteed funding, captive clients, and high salaries but has produced ineptitude, mediocrity, and failure on a massive scale. This failure cannot be quarantined as an academic issue, but amounts to a betrayal of the city's children and their parents, who deserve better. There is no legitimate excuse for this record and, in the year 2000, even less excuse for failing to make the necessary reforms.

Decades of research and experience have yielded hard knowledge of what works and what does not. The record is clear. Top-heavy bureaucracy, weak and reactionary leadership, union rigidity, shaky fiscal policies, low standards, and curriculum quackery have produced the unacceptable results so visible in Oakland.

De-regulation, innovation, flexibility, high standards, increased parental choice, and competition produce the kind of results that students in private schools have long enjoyed. Through public- and private-scholarship programs, cities such as Milwaukee are now extending opportunities to all students.

Oakland could do likewise, and transform itself from a national failure to a flagship of true reform. That will require clear thinking, courage, leadership, and a willingness to fight the entrenched interests certain to resist change. Given the record, the result is very much in doubt. What is not in doubt is that a better future for Oakland's children hangs in the balance, and that the state and nation will be watching.

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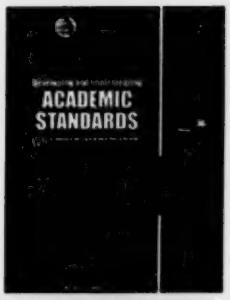

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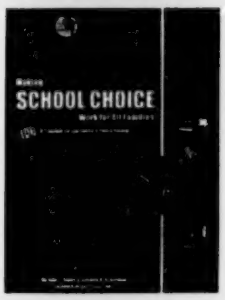

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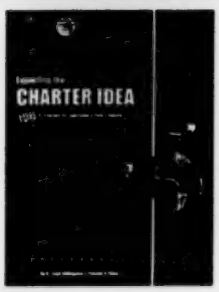

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